

TOWARD THE AUTONOMY OF RAPA NUI ?

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increasingly widening gap between the potential of Rapa Nui for its economic and cultural development and the seriousness and further deterioration of its management problems, as well as the inability of the present institutional setting to understand, face and solve them appropriately. A statute of autonomy – a condition so widespread at present in the world and not only for remote islands – could be the best starting point, the best trigger, to provide new trends, impetus, approaches and ways of action, and to solve a situation that has become intolerable.

THE POTENTIAL OF RAPA NUI

Few islands of the world, if any, have greater potential for development than Rapa Nui; this is in spite of its remoteness. This condition is no longer a factor of economic isolation *per se* within the current information society (di Castri 2003a). It does not prevent a local empowerment for development and conservation of cultural and natural heritage (di Castri 2003b).

The *imaginaire* of Rapa Nui, the most evoking power of attraction for tourism, is the most widespread and deeply rooted in the world (di Castri 1999a, 1999b). The word *imaginaire* (so widely used in Europe and even in India), but badly translated in English as “imaginary”, refers to an island as it is imagined in the world by an individual or collective representation and perception, but without implying falsity (di Castri *et al.* 2002a). Tourism marketing consists usually in creating (when it does not already exist) and largely diffusing the *imaginaire* of a specific land (di Castri 2003c).

In Europe and increasingly in Asia, Rapa Nui is the symbolic and charismatic island of the *imaginaire*, the island of *mana* (the Polynesian spiritual force that provides power and vision, even at distance). It is so much so, that *mana* is progressively taken in some countries of Europe as synonymous of local empowerment, also because of the difficulty to translate to other languages the notion of “local empowerment”. And local empowerment, as the mythic *mana*, is mostly achieved through access to and transmission of information, at distance and in real time, by individuals and local populations, including through the Internet and e-learning (di Castri *et al.* 2002b). *Mana* is increasingly taken in Europe as the symbol of the information society, in a similar way as Polynesian spirituality and arts inspired the most important cultural movement of last century, the *surrealism* (di Castri 1999a).

Tourism attraction of Rapa Nui is not only based on its unique archaeological remains, but also on the wild and forceful beauty of its land, on the spirituality released from its landscapes, and on their symbolic representation and perception. Of course, only a high-level cultural tourism can valorize this potential.

In addition, soil fertility is very high and appropriate for

some tropical agriculture of quality products, and underground water is easily available. The energy problem can also be rather easily solved through renewable and clean sources, such as wind energy for some less touristic part of the island, and solar energy elsewhere and particularly for more isolated settlements, as it has been so successfully achieved – for instance – in the Tuamotu and some Canary islands.

In a large project of the European Community on the Information Society, Rapa Nui represents the core of a so-called VIAD, a Virtual Institute for Alphabetization for Development (di Castri 2003d).

Furthermore, Chile – if Rapa Nui were properly managed and with a wise and large support given to its unique culture and Polynesian language – could use the island as its best geopolitical platform or bridge in search of an economic and cultural expansion toward the Pacific and Asia.

Nevertheless, this is not the case at present. Rapa Nui is more than three times less rich, when GNP is considered, than its neighbor and administratively autonomous French Polynesia (di Castri 2002).

Even more, Rapa Nui now is almost a world sample of unprecedented and amazing mistakes of land-use planning and management, almost a symbol of what should not absolutely be done to manage an island of these conditions. The causes or bottlenecks for such a strange “disaster” situation are a permanent decision-making crisis and the inherent incompetence of the manpower in charge of such a management (di Castri 1999b, 2003e).

RAPA NUI, A WORLD REPRESENTATION OF MANAGEMENT ERRORS

Reviewing and discussing management mistakes and their consequences in Rapa Nui, although restricted to recent periods, would imply *per se* an extensive article. I will only enumerate some of them, as follows.

- 1 Soil erosion is catastrophic at Rano Raraku (around the crater), Poike and Rano Kau where large parts of the abrupt slopes are falling to the sea, and it is largely spread everywhere. No preventive or soil rehabilitating measures are made in this respect.
- 2 Overgrazing by horses and cattle is terrific and is just pointless, since there is no need of so many horses (only for tourism purposes), and cattle remains almost non-exploited. In the absence of fences, horses and cattle go everywhere, in between and over *moai* and *ahu*, near Hanga Roa and in more remote parts of the island. Even the very heavy zebu Brahma has been introduced, further aggravating soil erosion. Cattle seems to play a kind of prestige and almost religious role, as for the nomads of Africa or the holy cows of India, but this does not belong to any historical tradition of Rapa Nui.
- 3 Uncontrolled grasses and shrubs in the National Park consti-

- tute a very large biomass of fuel material. When burned, this damages the soil and the living organisms therein, but also the conservation of the archaeological remains.
- 4 It is amazing to see how many alien and damaging species of plants and animals have been introduced to the island, intentionally or accidentally. No preventive or eradication measures are taken.
 - 5 The legitimate land distribution to native Rapanui (1.900 hectares of estates, five hectares each, that will be followed soon by other 1.500 hectares) was totally unplanned and unwise, just an allocation by hazard. No technical indication has been done on how best to use this land. With exception of a few rudimentary installations for irrigation water, no energy, potable water or waste disposal and treatment have been foreseen. The entire re-colonized zone is at risk of becoming an ugly squatter settlement, with no economic return for the settlers.
 - 6 Tropical agriculture in Rapa Nui is now a strange mixture, a piecemeal of species from coffee to pineapple, from cherimoya (*Annona cherimolla*) to papaya, from flowers to tubers, with no marketing studies on how to place these products to local, national (Chilean) and international markets. A considerable amount of the production is, therefore, just thrown out.
 - 7 Waste management is at very serious fault, even in Hanga Roa. Various far-reaching problems appear, and *dengue* in the island is not eradicated yet.
 - 8 An impressive invasion by rats is the most peculiar aspect, at present, in the island. Thousands of rats penetrate everywhere, in the official buildings, in hotels and restaurants, even in the field where young tree plantations are badly damaged. Health risks for gastro-enteritis diseases increase accordingly. I am not aware of any measure or plan to control and hopefully eradicate this plague.
 - 9 Marijuana is widely planted, consumed and openly sold with little or no control and repression.
 - 10 Too many boats for fishing have been allocated to the island. Fortunately, most of them are out of use because a lack of appropriate maintenance. However, over-fishing occurs, and lobster is at risk.
 - 11 Car and motorbike traffic in the island is almost with no control. Some casualties for motorbike accidents have occurred. The concentration of taxis (large taxis from the continent, not appropriate to the roads and the conditions of a small island) is perhaps the highest in the world (about a hundred) in relation to the population. They are imported without regulations or limitations. No electric or hybrid cars have been introduced, as it happens already in several islands of the world.

On conclusion, there is neither land-use planning nor urban planning whatsoever on Rapa Nui. There is a management plan for the National Park, but it is loosely applied or not applied, also because of shortage of personnel and lack of appropriate manpower.

There are also serious general problems that are not attributable to land mismanagement.

- 1 Health facilities in the island are poor. The hospital is inadequate to cover modern medical cares. Most biological analyses should be done in the continent, and patients – even for some rather common diseases – should be transported to the continent. This is, of course, very bad for residents. This is incompatible with the development of high-quality cultural tourism, where aging people are progressively involved to become future tourists.
- 2 Education is badly inspired. In spite of the dedication and commitment of a few Rapanui teachers, Spanish is becoming the first mother language (at a level of more than 70 % of the entry-school children), and Rapanui is thought of as a kind of foreign language. In spite of that, Spanish – in particular the written Spanish – is very rarely mastered by native people.
- 3 Tourism – that represents the basis and the trigger of the overall economy of Rapa Nui – is poorly oriented, with second-class services and lacking taste, including at several modern hotels (and in spite of their astronomical prices). Some *Residenciales* are better placed. Tourism in Rapa Nui – at present – follows almost opposite trends than those of the new paradigm for cultural tourism (di Castri and Balaji 2002).
- 4 Crime is increasing in Rapa Nui, and this is the major single factor to undermine tourism everywhere in the world.
- 5 Although it is not measurable because of the special conditions of Rapa Nui (no taxes are paid by the indigenous islanders and no control is possible on their income), drain of capital from the island to foreign countries (United States, French Polynesia, etc.) seems to be a common feature, thus preventing further and larger investments for the development of the island. The gap between the rich and the poor in the island is widening.
- 6 Because of the above points, the Polynesian Rapanui culture and value systems are vanishing on the island. The negative consequences on tourism, because of this loss of cultural identity, could be immense.

A PERMANENT DECISION-MAKING CRISIS IN RAPA NUI

It is really difficult to understand who makes decisions on the island, on what technical or political background they are made, and following what kind of plan or scenario for the economic and cultural development of Rapa Nui. Some decisions are contradictory, and invalidate and nullify each other.

The Chilean authorities on the island seem to have a kind of culpability complex (the Chilean colonization over the island was one of the worst and the most ill-conceived in the history of humankind) and thus are too permissive about the application of all kind of regulations as well as the fight against crime. Some Chilean institutions, such as CONAF (the Forestry Corporation that is in charge of the Rapa Nui National Park) and CORFO and SASIPA (that look over the agricultural development of the island, and in particular the administration of Hacienda Vaitea), seem to pursue opposite goals, with no coordination.

This situation is no better among Rapanui institutions, the Municipality, the Governor (that is the representative of the Chilean Government, but who is Rapanui himself), The Council of the Elders N° 1, the local Chamber of Tourism (while SER-

NATUR is a Chilean governmental agency for tourism), The Council of the Elders N° 2, the Rapa Nui Parliament (which is pursuing a total political independence from Chile) have disparate objectives and conflicting interests.

Mistrust dominates relations between islanders and *Continentales*, and is widely spread among Chilean institutions and, above all, among the Rapanui themselves. Neither economy nor rational management can be built on mistrust.

THE INHERENT INCOMPETENCE OF MANPOWER

The university training in continental Chile is rather good, although it has been progressively declining during the last years. Nevertheless, nowhere in Chile does adequate knowledge and training exist on how to manage a small Polynesian island like Rapa Nui, including soil erosion, tropical agriculture and animal husbandry, forestry and agro-forestry, management of national parks, tourism development, renewable energy, control of plagues and eradication of alien invasive species, appropriate housing, etc.

This is understandable, since ecological conditions in continental Chile – from Arica to Punta Arenas – are diversified, but do not resemble at all those of a very fragile oceanic and subtropical island as Rapa Nui. Conversely, it would be unreasonable to create in Chile a career or a specific training adapted just to Rapa Nui.

Accordingly, when Rapanui students go to continental Chile to continue their studies, they cannot find the kind of knowledge that would be relevant to their island. In addition, they tend to select non-scientific and non-technical (easier) careers like law, accountancy, psychology, etc., all fields where there is already a surplus in Rapa Nui.

Consequently, professionals working in Rapanui or for Rapanui are inherently incompetent to deal with the peculiar situation of the island, whatever is the level of their knowledge acquired in Chile. They tend to use for Rapa Nui a kind of knowledge applicable to other situations, but irrelevant and often very disruptive for Rapa Nui.

There would be a rather easy solution: to send Rapanui students and post-graduate Chileans to study in places where an excellent know-how exists on how to manage small tropical islands, such as Hawai'i, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Canary Islands or the specialized institutions for overseas research, development and training in France and the United Kingdom. This is very rarely done; it represents almost an accident.

As a negative result, even some routine and easily applicable management practices from French Polynesia or Hawai'i tend to be unknown or ignored in Rapa Nui.

AUTONOMY, A DIFFERENT STATUTE FOR RAPANUI

Having in mind the untenable situation of Rapa Nui as described above, I decided to concentrate – during the last months from December 2002 to July 2003 – a greater attention and a considerable amount of my working time, trying to review in-depth the management problems of the island and to illustrate some possible solutions to Chilean and Rapanui authorities. A mission to Rapa Nui and Chile from December 2002 to January 2003 was a kind of survey, exploring in depth the consequences of such a bad management and talking with as many Rapanui as

I could, from different perspectives and interests (di Castri 2003e).

During my mission in April, I delivered a full-week seminar on “Rapa Nui: Third Millennium. Development, Capacity-building and Autonomy”, open to tourism operators of different types, farmers, handicrafters, teachers and educators, and everybody wanting to attend and participate. A very long and animated discussion with the Rapanui Development Commission took place at the Rapanui “Gobernación” building. More official contacts were established with the Chilean central authorities.

In June 2003, activities took place mostly in Santiago, but involving several Rapanui coming from the island. Contacts and activities ranged from the different ministries of the Chilean Government (organized and coordinated by CIDEZE, the governmental committee for the development of the extreme zones of Chile), including at La Moneda Palace, the Chilean Academies of War (mostly the Army and the Air Forces, but with the presence of admirals from the Navy), industrialists and entrepreneurs, and Chilean Universities and research institutions, with 2-3 seminars per day. The fact of having received the highest Chilean decorations, the Great Cross of the Order Bernardo O'Higgins (in 2000), the Ph.D. *honoris causa* of the National University of Chile (in 2003) and the *Medalla Rectoral* (in 1999) has certainly facilitated my contacts with Chilean authorities.

In July, I organized and chaired an international conference in Italy (held in Rome, Porto Venere and the Palmaria Island in the Mediterranean), on “The Universe of the Islands. From Palmaria, the Fortresses of Knowledge, to Easter Island, the Navel of the World”. In spite of the very international nature of this conference – supported at the highest level by the Italian Presidency, the European Community, the Mayor of Rome and several other national and international institutions – the main objective was to give a new impetus to economic and cultural development of Rapa Nui. Both the Governor, Enrique Pakarati, and the Mayor, Petero Edmunds, were invited and actively participated in the conference, and established a number of invaluable contacts on economic, scientific, training, cultural and artistic venues to be developed in Rapa Nui during the forthcoming months and years.

During all the period from December 2002 to July 2003, permanent and intense contact and continuity of actions were achieved through e-mail.

Facing the immense problems of Rapa Nui, maintenance of *status quo* and “business as usual” are no longer conceivable. Three solutions are considered to change the statute of the island: a much greater administrative decentralization as regards the Chilean central Government, autonomy within the Chilean sovereignty, and full independence from Chile. Joining by Rapa Nui and integrating the autonomous territory of French Polynesia has no political feasibility whatsoever.

Decentralization would be good, as compared with present situation (at least Rapa Nui would stand out from its unwise dependence within the Fifth Region of Chile, that of Valparaíso), but it is far from being enough. None of the structural problems of the island would be solved with just increased decentralization.

Chile would never accept the independence of the island.

In any case, international negotiation and arbitration would take some ten years or more. Furthermore, the original document of the annexation by Chile in 1888, shown in Rapa Nui and explained by Grant McCall in June 2002 – a document implying that Chile has never ratified the Act of Annexation – represents an interesting historical finding, but its value in international jurisprudence for changing the statute of Rapa Nui is very low or irrelevant. Finally, the economic and social situation of small Polynesian independent states, such as the Kingdom of Tonga or Western Samoa, is extremely bad, close to a disaster, 10 to 17 times poorer than French Polynesia when GNP is considered, even 3 to 5 times poorer than Rapa Nui. Incidentally, this is the usual pattern when independent small islands are compared with dependent, but autonomous, islands sharing similar ecological and resource conditions (McElroy and Mahoney 2000).

Autonomy is the only viable solution for Rapa Nui. It has proved to give excellent results in archipelagos such as those of French Polynesia, Canary Islands, Balearic Islands, in addition to New Caledonia and practically all Mediterranean islands. Autonomy does not apply only to islands, but also to regions within a country (for example, all regions of Spain, Wales, Scotland and North Ireland in the United Kingdom, Quebec in Canada, Lapland in Norway, and this list could be extremely long). Autonomy is – in the present world – the most viable situation to face the challenges of globalization with specific, cultural-centered and economically competitive responses. Autonomy does not go against the sovereignty of a given country, Chile in this case. The primary functions of a State-Nation remain untouched: justice, defense, international relations and treaties, respect to constitution and law. For some other functions and attributes, there is a so-called “devolution” of competence from the central state to an autonomous territory. While varying in the world from one to another autonomy statute, devolution refers usually to education, health, land tenure, land use and planning, taxation system, control of migratory flows, all aspects having a paramount dimension for economic and cultural development. The unity, integrity and identity of a State are in no way undermined by autonomy. Rather they are enhanced and strengthened, because of the decrease of conflictive tensions and a better economic development and wealth.

Is the Rapanui society mature and responsible to acquire this kind of autonomy as described above? Probably not yet, but it will never become mature and responsible unless an autonomy process initiates. Autonomy, local empowerment and local governance are attributes and conditions that are learned progressively by doing.

CONCLUSIONS

When this process started in April 2003, hardly anyone from the Rapanui and Chilean authorities was in favor of an autonomy statute. They were suspicious and reluctant. They were unaware of the concept, praxis and implementation of autonomy, in spite of the fact that this process is currently so common in the world, particularly in Europe and some parts of Asia.

At present, the Group of Personalities (*Grupo de Personalidades*) nominated by the Chilean Government to look upon the statute of Rapa Nui – a group that includes an ex-President

of Chile, ex-Ministers, members of the Senate and the Chilean Parliament, in addition to the Governor, the Major and the President of the Council of the Elders of Easter Island – has voted **unanimously** in July 2003 in favor of a statute contemplating autonomy (another option was also proposed, as an alternative, but totally rejected). It is rather suggested for Rapa Nui to become a “Territorio especial con condiciones de autonomía” (Special territory with autonomous conditions), since it seems to be the formula most compatible with just a minor change of the Chilean constitution. Of course, the denomination “Territorio Autónomo de Rapa Nui” would have been better to increase the geopolitical visibility and appreciation of Chile through this process, but substantively it means the same for Rapa Nui.

Chilean newspapers in June, July and August 2003, as well as radio and television programs, were almost everyday providing news and information about this process. To my knowledge, never before there has been in Santiago such unprecedented interest on Rapa Nui. Some articles are quoted as a sample (*Boletín Universidad de Chile* 2003, di Castri 2003f, 2003g, 2003h, *El Mercurio* 2003a, 2003b, Guzmán 2003, *La Tercera* 2003a, b, c, d, Pinochet de la Barra 2003). In most of them, my own personal role and contribution to the overall process of autonomy and to new trends for development in Rapa Nui are fairly mentioned.

In Rapa Nui itself, indigenous people freely discuss autonomy – a concept totally unfamiliar to them until recently – taking into account and consulting the two best examples in the world of island autonomy, those of French Polynesia and of the Canary Islands (Spain), both of 1996 (but a new vaster statute of autonomy is in preparation in French Polynesia right now). Probably for the first time in several years, the three authorities of the island, the Major, the Governor and the President of the Council of the Elders, have to be aligned and pursuing similar objectives.

Unavoidably, there are objections and rejections to autonomy both in continental Chile and Rapa Nui. In Chile, some people and politicians are reluctant to give a statute of special territory and autonomy to Rapa Nui, since this can open the door for several other claiming of similar type: the Mapuches, the Aymará, perhaps Chiloé Island, Tierra del Fuego, Arica, etc. This is totally understandable, because – within the centralized political traditions of Chile, unlike many European and Asian countries – there is little room for territorial autonomy and even real decentralization (incidentally, this implies a serious adaptation crisis of Chile vis-a-vis the challenges of globalization). These further claims are, in fact, expectable. In my view, they would be even very good to provide a new impetus to the Chilean economy and to reaffirm a strong Chilean identity based on the respect of different cultures.

In Rapa Nui, groups claiming a total independence from Chile still exist, while they seem to represent a small minority. This is understandable too. From one side, nothing is more appealing for a people than the word of “independence”, although in this case obstacles and constraints to achieve it are impossible to overcome. On the other side, it is not easy to forget how harsh Chile has been in the past. During its colonization, the entire Rapanui population was locked in a kind of fenced concentration camp – Hanga Roa – for some 70 years in order to

allow for a large sheep ranch, something unique in the history of world's colonization. The groups desiring total independence belong mostly to the Rapa Nui Parliament and to the Council of Elders N° 2. Some of their claims, the establishment of a Kingdom, the nomination of a King (on what grounds?) with a small group of counselors, the union in only one country of all people and land from Polynesia, are either non-democratic or non-realistic.

In this moment, autonomy is a ball in the court of the Chilean and Rapanui authority. Hopefully, they will not lose this unique opportunity for a turning point in the history of Rapa Nui, a turning point toward a development with dignity and cultural pride, in close alliance and partnership with Chile. Whatever the final decision and results might be, conditions in Rapa Nui can only improve now, because of a new awareness of the Chilean authorities, of Chilean public opinion and Rapanui themselves on the situation of the island and its potentially great destiny to reach the universality of a culture.

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